

## Women in the Finnish Art Scene at the Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Education, Status and Career Opportunities

Anu Utriainen

Women played an important role in the construction of the field of art in Finland in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and later in the portrayal of a modern civic society. They were also bold and innovative, experimenting with styles and forms, as well as techniques. In this essay, I will give an overview of women's opportunities in getting an education and creating a career as artists between 1880's and 1940's in Finland. In comparison to other European countries, women in Finland had exceptional opportunities to work as professional artists. I will also concentrate on identity, language and social structures in the Finnish art scene. The women artists in the exhibition, Helene Schjerfbeck, Sigrid Schauman, Ellen Thesleff, Elga Sesemann, Maria Wiik, and the two sculptors Sigrid af Forselles and Hilda Flodin, are used as case studies.

*“Miss, never become an artist. The world will let an artist perish—you are too talented to ever gain understanding.”* <sup>[1]</sup>

These are the words of Helene Schjerfbeck who gave them as an instruction to Sigrid Schauman, who was her pupil in the Finnish Art Society's Drawing school. Schjerfbeck taught at the Drawing school in the 1890's and mentored numerous other artists at the start of their careers, many of whom had illustrious careers as professional artists later on (fig.1). Apart from Schauman, also Ellen Thesleff and Hilda Flodin – amongst many others – were her students who became well known painters, and who are now shown in the exhibition 'Modern Woman' in the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo. As a woman, Helene Schjerfbeck understood the difficulties a young girl would encounter in an art world – and in the whole professional world, for that matter - dominated by men.

On the other hand, she became disappointed with the conflict between her art concept and that of the Art Society's board. Schjerfbeck was considered an excellent and dedicated teacher although her art was not always understood. Schjerfbeck gave up teaching in 1902 as she did not find the job suitable for herself. She considered the art world as tough and harsh, but as an artist she had an



fig.1  
Finnish Art Society's landscape painters with teacher Thorsten Waenerberg in the staircase of Ateneum, 1896  
Photo: Finnish Heritage Agency, Historical Picture Collection

extremely uncompromising and ambitious attitude towards her career. She considered teaching a hard job, but it had been necessary in terms of earning a living.

When considering the bigger picture, Schjerfbeck's words to Schauman illustrate a woman's position and role in the Finnish art field at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an art teacher as well as a professional artist and as a former art student, who could make a career based on the free art education organized by the Art Society.

One can approach this subject not only as a gender issue, but also through the context of language and social conditions and structures. Therefore you might ask, what were women's possibilities to create an independent professional careers? What other roles or positions were possible to achieve through education? What was a woman's status during this era?

In my essay I will address these issues and the meaning of art education in Finland at the turn of the century on a more general level as well as through some artist examples.

The first Finnish women began careers in art in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when the first schools offering basic art education were founded. The most appreciated of them was the Finnish Art Society's Drawing school, established in 1848.

The school found permanent premises in 1887 when the Ateneum building was finished. The Ateneum originally served a variety of different functions (fig.2). One half of the building was taken up by the collections and the Drawing School, while the other half accommodated the School of Applied Art and the collections and offices of the Finnish Society of Crafts and Design. Today, the Ateneum Art Museum / Finnish National Gallery is home to Finland's largest collection and also the largest in terms of art made by woman artists.

From the beginning, Finland's art schools were open to girls and boys alike. The country's first artists began their work; much was expected of them and the pressure on them was great. After all, the country wanted its "own" artists who would record its landscapes,

fig.2  
Façade of the Ateneum building,  
1890  
Finnish National Gallery, Archive  
Collections. The University  
of Helsinki Department of Art  
History Donation Collection.  
Photographer: Daniel Nyblin,  
Helsinki



people and historical events in unforgettable moments.

After their basic studies, students, irrespective of gender, continued abroad: in St Petersburg in Russia, Dresden and Düsseldorf in Germany and, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, increasingly so in Paris.

In the 1880s, the Finnish Art Society and a few private benefactors awarded stipends and travel grants to students, and women too could travel to Europe to paint copies of famous masterpieces in museums and further their studies either under private teachers or in private art academies such as Colarossi or Julian in Paris.

There is no specific data regarding the amount of women students in the Art Society Drawing School's first year, but in spring 1849 there were 38 students out of which 14 were women. The relation between genders stayed approximately the same for two decades. In the early years, there were no separate classes for men and women, they all studied at the same time and attended same classes. Separation was not necessary as drawing the nude was not a part of the educational program.

The living model, the nude, was also the main reason women students were not allowed to study in the public art academies in Europe, as drawing and painting the nude was not considered suitable for women. If they wanted to continue their art education, they had to apply for the private academies which were usually more expensive for women than men.

Drawing the nude became possible in Finnish Art Society's Drawing School towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (fig.3). Still, for example in 1897, when Helene Schjerfbeck was teaching there, men and women were separated due to conception of morals: it was not appropriate for both sexes to draw the nude at the same time.

At the turn of the century the painting classes were already very full but the separation continued, as we can see in the photography taken in Hugo Simberg's class in 1912 or 1913. The division into groups by gender was not only separation in a negative sense, it also



fig.3  
Students of Finnish Art Society's  
Drawing School in Ateneum,  
1899  
Finnish National Gallery, Archive  
Collections. Archive of Väinö  
Hämäläinen.  
Photographer: Jakob Ljungqvist,  
Helsinki

strengthened the networks and friendships between women students.

The mutual networks of women artists were indeed strong and often life-long. Maria Wiik and Helene Schjerfbeck shared a studio and worked closely together. After their student years, their travels and their early career, their personal and professional friendship continued in frequent correspondence.

A similar artistic comradeship formed between Sigrid Schauman and Ellen Thesleff. Exhibition reviews written by Schauman of Thesleff were important for both of them.

Their circle of friends, who liked to call themselves 'painter sisters', included several other women artists who had begun their careers in the 1880s. They were the first generation of women artists in Finland who engaged professionally in the arts on a broad front. The comradeship between the above mentioned as well as Helena Westermarck, Ada Thilén, Elin Danielson-Gambogi and Amélie Lundahl lasted for decades.

Visual arts and music were recommended as a hobby and skill amongst the upper social classes, but working professionally and gaining success was challenging. The amount of women who were able to build up an actual independent career as visual artists were few.

Expectations regarding women were often very traditional; they were expected to paint flowers and still-lives and teach decorative painting, arts and crafts, illustration, and drawing. Women, however, wanted to show that art was much more expressive and inclusive than this. In 1905, the Ateneum held its first women's group exhibition, concurrently with extensive public debate on women's suffrage. The exhibition drew attention but did not solve the problems of the artists' status and visibility.<sup>[2]</sup>

While women were able to make independent career choices, public art policy did not encourage them to experiment. The safe and familiar were preferred. This becomes clear in looking at the reviews of art works made by women, and their exhibitions.

For example, Helene Schjerfbeck's early work *A Boy Feeding his Little Sister* (fig.4), painted in Brittany in late 1880's, was brutally criticized for showing ugly and greedy children. According to the review nearly everything was done in a wrong manner. Professor Riitta Kontinen, who has studied the history of Finnish women artists in great depth, has shown that this was especially obvious in reviews of women's works, which also commented on the status of women and artists' appearance.<sup>[3]</sup>

In the reviews, perception of women was intermingled with their status and gender: they were most frequently evaluated in relation

to their male teachers, idols or spouses rather than as independent artists. In this context, women were only taken seriously after a long-term and persistent effort and they had shown undeniable evidence of being professional artists.

Furthermore, the female body was largely medicalized and a woman, working in the art field, was often labelled as a victim of neuropathy, or hysteria. For women, the role and status of an artist was seen unnatural, and in case a woman pursued an artistic career, she was presumed to stay unmarried and childless. Since 1864 unmarried women over 25 had, however, the advantage of being legally independent as husbands were the legal guardians of their wives until 1930.

A woman's relationship with family, property, career and publicity were different when she was an artist rather than a housewife or clerical worker. Therefore, the risk of quitting studies was high, due to the common perception of women's social status and the realities of making a living through artistic work. Out of the women students in the Drawing school, approximately one third completed only the first term. Sometimes women took commented women's status in society quite frankly through their art, as we can see in this painting *Admirer in a Blue Suit* by Greta Hällfors-Sipilä (fig.5).

To give an example, 40% of the upper middle class women, born in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, were single at the age of 30, which also meant they often stayed unmarried. If their parents preferred a modern upbringing, they educated their daughters, who might take up a career as teachers if the family support for some reason would end. This development was one of the main background factors in the social change and rise of the women's movement at the turn of the century in Finland, which also lead to women's right to vote as the first country in Europe and to run for senate – as the first country in the world in 1906. This

fig.4  
Helene Schjerfbeck  
*A Boy Feeding his Little Sister*  
1881  
Oil on canvas  
115 x 94,5 cm  
Finnish National Gallery /  
Ateneum Art Museum  
Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
Yehia Eweis

fig.5  
Greta Hällfors-Sipilä  
*Admirer in a Blue Suit*  
1922  
Oil on canvas  
61,6 x 51,9 cm  
Finnish National Gallery /  
Ateneum Art Museum  
Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
Hannu Pakarinen



was a remarkable achievement considering it also was the very first time universal suffrage was granted to men in the Grand Duchy of Finland, 11 years before independence.

As noted, from very early on, many women artists engaged in other work in the field of art. In addition to creative work, they also worked as teachers, artisans and critics. This notwithstanding, they were not appointed to head associations or sit on award or acquisition committees. The board members of the Finnish Art Society and the members of its award and acquisition committees were always men.<sup>[4]</sup> Only men were elected to positions in the Society until 1956, when a woman was elected deputy board member.<sup>[5]</sup> This woman was the graphic artist Tuulikki Pietilä, who is also known as the life-long partner of Tove Jansson (fig.6). It was not until 1981 that a woman was elected to the acquisition committee and even then her position was that of deputy member.<sup>[6]</sup>



fig.6  
Tuulikki Pietilä at her studio with  
a cat, 1964  
Source: *Helsingin Sanomat*, 12  
March 2017, p. C 3

Given the fact that women had to struggle to gain visibility and success, the Finnish educational system also offered open and free elementary education to everybody. The basic art education in the Drawing school offered the possibility to pursue an artistic career in spite of gender. For women, this formed the basis to a more independent life, and in a larger and a more public perspective, education strengthened women's status in society and opened up the route to greater equality between men and women. However, still in the 19<sup>th</sup> century a woman's socio-economic status defined the preconditions of her career choices.

One central social and political factor was the division between the Swedish-speaking upper class and the Finnish-speaking rural population. Finnish became the country's national language alongside Swedish two years after Finland gained independence from Russia, in 1919. Here you can see a cartoon which was published in the satirical magazine *Fyren* about this subject as well as the separation between men and women in the art classes (fig.7).

Most influential people in the art world and most artists, too, were Swedish-speaking and this educated class was fluent also in Russian, French and German. Nearly all women artists came from this upper social class and their mother tongue was Swedish. Hilda Flodin, Sigrid af Forselles, Sigrid Schauman, Helene Schjerfbeck, Ellen Thesleff and Maria Wiik were all Swedish-speakers. Elga Sesemann's family was of Baltic origin and she grew up with German and Russian, learning



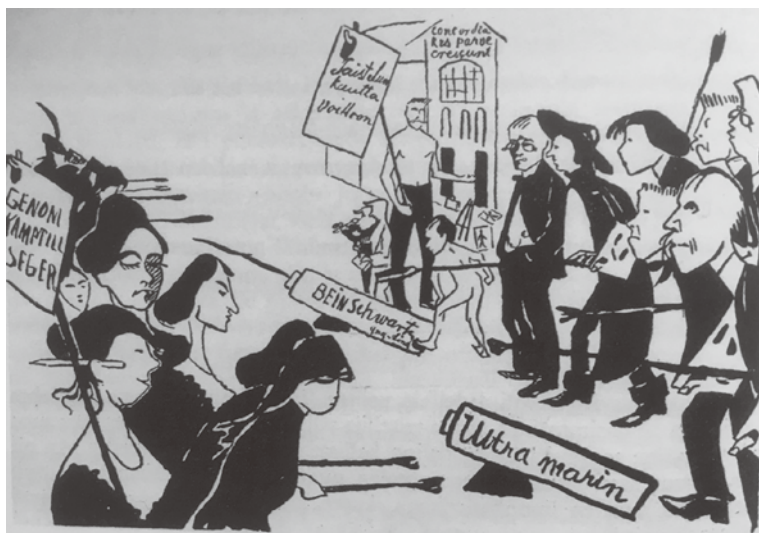


fig.7  
Dispute between women and men  
students in Ateneum in 1904  
Source: *Fyren*, 12 March 1904

Finnish in school.

This started to change in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the first working class male artists began their careers. Among women, working class background was still very rare.

The early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was generally an unfavorable time for women artists. This was partly due to the relationship between classicism and modernism which was complex. The new independence had created a need for a specifically nationalistic Finnish art, and Swedish-speaking women artists and art critics were the most open proponents of modernism and often engaged in disputes that reflected the confrontation between Finnish art and art that was considered international.

At the same time there was a quickly increasing amount of male artists and this is statistically seen in the small amount of stipends granted to women as well as in the acquisitions to museum collections. Against this background, it was a great honor for Helene Schjerfbeck to get a commission from the Members of the Board of the Finnish Art Society in 1914. The Board commissioned self-portraits from 10 eminent artists. Schjerfbeck was the only woman among these ten and her painting found its place in the Art Society's meeting room (fig.8).

Artists like Schjerfbeck and Thesleff got attention, but many women in the period between the two wars became forgotten. As an example, a woman was not granted the ducat prize for young artists even once between 1904-1936. Painting was still the main genre, there were only a few women students in the art of

fig.8  
Helene Schjerfbeck  
*Self-Portrait, Black Background*  
1915  
Oil on canvas  
45,5 x 36 cm  
Finnish National Gallery /  
Ateneum Art Museum, Herman  
and Elisabeth Hallonblad  
Collection  
Photo: Finnish National Gallery /  
Hannu Aaltonen



sculpture.

Sigrid af Forselles can be recognized as one of the first women in Finland to make a career as sculptor, she belonged to the same group of women who had studied together at the drawing school of the Finnish Art Society in the 1870's (fig.9).

Ellen Thesleff became known for her individual and unique wood cuts at the turn of the century. Hilda Flodin studied painting for five years but became interested in sculpture and graphic prints, and was the only woman to take part in the first exhibition of graphic prints in Finland in 1907 (fig.10). Some years before, together with Sigrid af Forselles, she had also worked with Auguste Rodin in his studio Paris.

In the 1930's there was an increasing interest towards graphic prints among women, and all the graduates from the first course in graphic art in the newly established School of Applied Arts were women.

Women studied art, traveled and exhibited their works in Finland and abroad. Their works were discussed in reviews and criticism and they were acquired for collections. In some cases, their careers ended when they started families. Some took on other jobs. Importantly, however, acquisitions of their works gave them a role in the history of Finnish art. Even more importantly, many of them were ground-breaking artists, regardless of gender.

The exhibition 'Modern Woman' tells a story of uncompromising expression and unwavering action against a background of the period and its social conditions.

It is about developing artistic careers and the reception of art works. But it is also a story of independent and expressive women who reinvented themselves time and again, of artists who lived, traveled and thought as they pleased and at the same time set an example for future generations.



fig.9  
Sigrid af Forselles, ca. 1900  
Photo: Finnish Heritage Agency, Historical Picture Collection

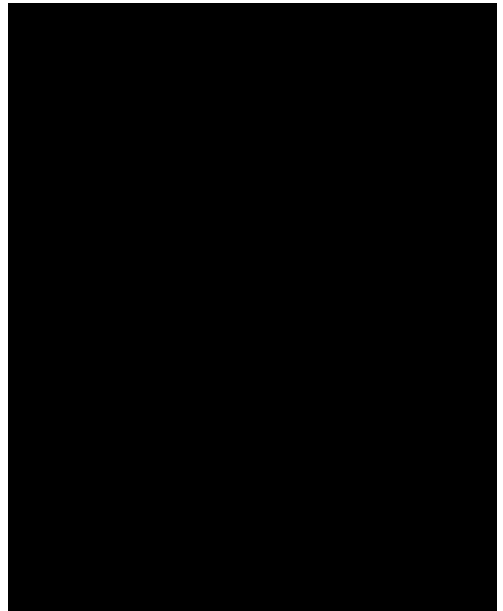


fig.10  
Hilda Flodin  
*Self-Portrait*  
1901  
Pencil on paper  
32,0 x 23,0 cm  
Finnish National Gallery / Ateneum Art Museum  
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Henri Tuomi



This essay is partly based on the following articles:

Susanna Pettersson, "Independent Women as Artists: Status, Education and Reception of Their Works", Azu Kubota (ed.), *Modern Woman: Finnish Women Artists from the Collection of Ateneum, Finnish National Gallery*, exh. cat., Tokyo: The National Museum of Western Art, The Western Art Foundation, 2019, pp.153-157; Anu Utriainen, "Finnish Women Artists in the Modern World", *Modern Woman, op. cit.*, pp.158-165.

[1] Riitta Konttinen, *Oma tie, Helene Schjerfbeckin elämä*, Helsinki: Otava, 2004, p.191.

[2] Riitta Konttinen, *Täältä tullaan! Naistaiteilijat modernin murroksessa*, Helsinki: Siltala, 2017, pp.26-27.

[3] Konttinen 2017, *op.cit.*, p.21.

[4] Susanna Pettersson, *Suomen Taideyhdistyksestä Ateneumiin. Fredrik Cygnaeus, Carl Gustaf Estlander ja taidekokoelman roolit*, Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society and the Finnish National Gallery, 2008, pp.302-303.

[5] Annual report of the Fine Arts Academy of Finland for 1956, manuscript. Archive of the Finnish National Gallery.

[6] *Fine Arts Academy of Finland*, 1981, Helsinki, p.14. Graphic artist Marjatta Nuoreva.

## 20世紀初頭におけるフィンランド美術界の女性たち：教育、地位、キャリアの機会

アヌ・ウトライネン

近代フィンランドの女性芸術家たちは、専門的な基礎教育を提供する最初の美術学校が設立された19世紀半ばにそのキャリアを歩み始めた。なかでも、1848年に開校したフィンランド芸術協会の素描学校は、創立当初から女子学生の入学を認め、彼女たちの国外旅行や留学も奨励した。同校では、男女が同じクラスで平等に学ぶことができた。だが、それは教育プログラムに裸体モデルのデッサンが含まれていなかったためであり、19世紀末頃に裸体モデルに基づく素描の授業が導入されると、モラルの問題から男女は別々のクラスに分けられた。その結果、女性芸術家同士の生涯にわたる交流や強い同胞意識が育まれることになった。

芸術は、上流階級の家庭では女性の趣味や教養として受け入れられたが、芸術家として身を立て成功を収めることは非常に困難であった。女性たちは花や静物を描き、装飾画や手工芸、挿絵や素描を教えることを期待された。女性芸術家の作品や展覧会の批評文では、女性の地位や容姿について言及され、彼女たちの教師や称賛する男性芸術家、配偶者の芸術家との関係や比較で評価されることがほとんどであった。

多くの女性芸術家は、制作以外の面からも美術分野に関わっており、教師、職人、批評家としても仕事をした。ヘレン・シャルフベックも1890年代にフィンランド芸術協会の素描学校の教師として後進を指導し、多くの優れた芸術家を輩出している。しかし、こうした状況にもかかわらず、女性たちが同芸術協会の理事会のような団体の代表に任命されることが、賞の選考委員や作品の収集委員の座に就くことはなかった。

19世紀のフィンランドにおいて、平等で充実した公教育システムの導入は女性の社会的地位の向上を促したが、言語の問題はいまだ彼女たちの職業選択に関わる重要な社会的、政治的要因の一つであった。フィンランド語は1919年にスウェーデン語と並んで国の公用語として認められることになるが、19世紀にはスウェーデン語を話す上流階級とフィンランド語を話す農村部の人々との間には断絶があった。実際、当時美術界で強い影響力を持った人々や、ほぼ全ての女性芸術家はスウェーデン語話者の家庭出身だった。

労働者階級の男性芸術家が台頭し始める20世紀初頭から状況は変化した。が、大戦間期は一般的に女性芸術家にとってさらに困難な時代であった。労働者階級の女性芸術家はいまだほとんどおらず、スウェーデン系の女性芸術家は、彼女たちの支持する国際的なモダニズムの美術と、国家の独立によって必要とされた新たなフィンランド美術との対立を巡る議論に加わった。この時代、シャルフベックやエレン・テスレフのような存在を除き、多くの女性芸術家が忘れ去られていった。しかし重要なことに、女性芸術家による作品がコレクターや美術館に収集されていたことで、のちに彼女たちに、フィンランド美術史における役割が与えられるようになる。そして収集対象となった女性たちの多くは、時代を切り開いた革新的な芸術家であった。

[抄訳：久保田有寿]